

## History of Medicine

# Kheyr-on-Nessa Amoli, An Iranian Lady Physician in the Gurkani Court of India

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## Abstract

The popularity of the science of medicine in the Gurkani Court of India relied on the presence and scientific work of Iranian scholars. Iranian women, like men, enjoyed this area of science and were also actively involved in social issues. The remarkable participation of Iranian female physicians in some medical fields, such as issues and care in pregnancy, child-bearing, and baby care, is among their scientific contributions to the changes and growing trends in medicine. These affairs were monopolized by women who held this knowledge for centuries. One of the women who was considerably successful in this field was Zat-on-Nessa Amoli, titled Kheyr-on-Nessa, a seventeenth-century female Iranian physician. This research aimed to study the contributions and scientific life of this poet and Iranian physician based on historical documents and texts, considering the research on the science and knowledge of medicine.

**Keywords:** Gurkani era, Kheyr-on-Nessa, India, Iran, Safavid era

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## Introduction

The medical profession was not restricted to men, and women were actively involved in this field. They worked as assistants of physicians or midwives since many years ago as mentioned by Rhazes (865 – 925 A.D.).<sup>1</sup> As Will Durant maintains (1885 – 1981 A.D.), women were the first to perform medical activities in primitive societies. It seems that women's interest in medicine was not solely due to their taking care of men and doing midwifery; rather it was a result of their familiarity with medical herbs. "...because their closer connection with the soil gave them a better knowledge of plants, and enabled them to develop the art of medicine as distinct from the magic-mongering, it was the woman who healed. Only when the woman failed did the primitive sick resort to the medicine-man and shaman".<sup>2</sup> Ibn Khaldun (1332 – 1406 A.D.) is one of the people who greatly respected midwives. In the introduction to his history book, he writes, "We have found that midwives are more familiar with the diseases of children from birth to weaning than physicians, and that is because the human body is not fully complete during this period".<sup>3</sup> Midwives also helped women bear children and tried to perform harmless abortions of the pregnancies of divorcees and widows.<sup>4</sup> In the Safavid era in Iran and the Gurkani era in India, there were many female nurses and midwives. All childbirths

were performed with the help of midwives in this era, but unfortunately there is very little recorded information about them.<sup>5</sup>

This article aims to study the scientific and social role and status of Zat-on-Nessa Amoli, titled Kheyr-on-Nessa, among physicians and scientists of the Mughal Court of India from 1627 A.D. to 1647 A.D., using a descriptive-analytical method based on historical documents and texts. In fact, the activity of a female Iranian physician in the Gurkani Court represents the high status of Iranian physicians in medicine at that time.

## Zat-on-Nessa Amoli

Zat-on-Nessa was born in 1579 A.D. in Amol, now in Mazandaran province.<sup>6</sup> This female physician and famous poet with the names "Zat-on-Nessa" and "Seti-on-Nessa Beygom" managed to show that, under conditions where there are few opportunities for women's participation in social affairs, they can be effective in scientific promotion within the society in spite of difficulties imposed on them by men. Zat-on-Nessa was the elder sister of Taleb Amoli (1586 – 1626 A.D.), the famous poet in the Safavid era and the poet laureate of the Indian court.<sup>7</sup> When her brother was in Iran, she married a man from Kashan, who was called Nasserri or Nassira Kashi and known to be her cousin, and they migrated to India.<sup>8,9</sup> Nasserri had a brother called Rokni or Rokna and both brothers were among competent physicians of Kashan. Thus, marriage put Zat-on-Nessa on the path towards medicine, the science which had a remarkable effect on the life of this hard working and progressive woman.<sup>8</sup>

Zat-on-Nessa entered Agra in 1627 A.D. Having learned medicine after years of training under Rokna and Nassira, she decided to achieve high status in Indian society with her knowledge of medicine.<sup>5</sup> After her husband passed away, she entered the Gurkani court because of her knowledge of medicine and was appointed as the special servant of Mumtaz Mahal (1593 – 1613 A.D.).<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, in Shah Jahan's era, the Mughal Empire of

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Figure 1. The Tomb of Lady Seti in the western part Taj Mahal

India achieved a high status in terms of power, influence, and scientific and cultural growth.<sup>11</sup> In addition to curing women's diseases; she was very skilful in nursing. If someone became sick in the court, she took responsibility for nursing him/her. Seti-on-Nessa made the Indian society accept that nursing of ill people is achieved much better by women than men. Unfortunately, however, nothing is mentioned about her approach to nursing in the history. She was responsible for nursing the princes and princesses, and did this in an effective way.<sup>10</sup> An example of this occurred in 1635 A.D., when Shah Jahan went from Lahore to Agra, and Prince Murad Bakhsh (1620 – 1662 A.D.) caught smallpox. The king ordered Vazir Khan Hakim Elm-od-Din to cure the prince and Seti-on-Nessa to nurse him.<sup>10</sup> In the book *Amal-e Salehi*, Ghaeni-e Heravi says that she was exceptionally skilful in curing and nursing dangerous diseases and medical conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Based on the king's commands, the Iranian female physician was summoned to the court to carry out important duties for the royal family, such as medical supervision and care for the king's harem. At the beginning, she became the special servant of Mumtaz Mahal, the favorite wife of Shah Jahan.<sup>5,11</sup>

Shah Jahan also appointed Zat-on-Nessa to be the teacher of her daughter, Jahan Ara Beygom (1614 – 1681 A.D.), because of her familiarity with reading the Holy Quran and Persian literature. When Mumtaz Mahal passed away in 1631, the king appointed Lady Seti as the head of his harem, and she maintained this position until the end of her life.<sup>13</sup> In 1626, his brother Taleb Amoli passed away and she became the caretaker of his two little daughters; she showed her motherly love in this way because she did not have any children of her own. When these two girls grew up and reached the age of marriage, she arranged for them to marry great physicians. The elder daughter was married to Hakim Enayatollah-e Shirazi, titled Aghel Khan, and the younger was married to Hakim Zia-od-Din titled Rahmat Khan, who was the

nephew of Hakim Rokna and a relative of Lady Seti's husband.<sup>10</sup>

On Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1647 A.D., Lady Seti's younger niece passed away after childbirth. Lady Seti lamented for 11 days in a house outside the palace at Lahore. A few days later, Shah Jahan, with his daughter Jahan Ara Beygom, went to her home to comfort her, and he consoled her and brought her to the palace. But a few days later, she passed away, on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1647 A.D., at the age of 68, as a result of the sufferings she had undergone.<sup>10</sup>

The status and position of this hardworking woman were so high in the eyes of Shah Jahan and his agents that 10,000 rupees were paid by the king for her funeral and shrine. In addition, in order to celebrate the services of this Iranian female physician, the income of a village near Akbar Abad of India was devoted to the affairs and maintenance of her shrine and her home.<sup>14</sup> Her tomb is located in the western part of the Taj Mahal (Figure 1).<sup>10</sup>

One of the interesting facts about her life was that she was never unwilling to study, and she was even reading an hour before her death when she had respiratory problems.<sup>10</sup> The poetry book *Taleba*, which is in Tabari dialect and based on an Indian style of poetry, is attributed to her.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, in spite of social limitations for women resulting from unfavorable political conditions in previous centuries, some of them, nonetheless, managed to involve themselves in areas in which they could prove their abilities. Zat-on-Nessa is a special character in the history of Iran and India, who could learn science and literature and cure women's diseases, and who gradually became one of the most well-known physicians. In addition to medicine, she was responsible for the service of Mumtaz Mahal, Shah Jahan's favorite wife, and the company of Jahan Ara, Shah Jahan's daughter, as well as the harem's affairs. In this way, she was aware of political issues in addition to medical and health affairs. Moreover, she was knowledgeable and skilful in poetry and literature.

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